



Fort Mackinac Cannon Firing Demonstration Auxiliary Aid for the Hearing Impaired

Program Content Overview:

This interpretative program focuses on the use of the Model 1841 six-pound smoothbore cannon by the 23rd Infantry at Fort Mackinac for ceremonial purposes and explains why it was an obsolete piece by the 1880s in comparison to artillery advancements of the time. The program will explain why the Model 1841 six pounder smoothbore was considered antiquated, outdated, and inaccurate by the 1880s. The program will provide a general overview and breakdown of the characteristics of the gun itself and how it was used, explain the use of the piece at Fort Mackinac in the 1880s for ceremonial purposes and then conclude with a demonstration of the cleaning, loading and firing of the cannon.

Model 1841 Six Pound Smoothbore Cannon and its Characteristics

The Model 1841 Six Pound Smoothbore Field Gun was generally referred to simply as a "six-pounder." The term "six-pounder" referred to the weight of the projectile, which was a six pound, cast iron cannon ball. The cannon had a maximum range of one mile (for reference, that's roughly to the shores of Round Island), at which it would have been wildly inaccurate because of the lack of rifling, but had a more accurate range of half a mile, (roughly to the edge of the breakwater in the harbor) which would have adequately defended the harbor and the village below. The six-pounder's use by the 1880s when the 23rd Infantry administered Fort Mackinac was entirely ceremonial. The cannon was used for firing what were called "salute shots" which consisted of a smaller amount of gunpowder without a cannon ball, fired to celebrate local events, daily routine, or federal holidays. This included the raising or lowering of the flag, commandant's birthday, special visitors to the island, Fourth of July festivities or other special events at the fort.

Cleaning, Loading and Firing Procedures:

The demonstration begins with one of the gun “crew” members using the heavy leather glove known as the “thumb-stall” to cover the “touch hole” on the tube of the gun in order to cut off airflow into the cannon. This is to prevent any remaining embers in the gun tube from previous cannon fires which could be stoked up and create a safety hazard for the gunner who will be loading the piece at the end of the cannon tube’s muzzle. The person loading the gun (known as the “gunner”) will search the piece with the gunner's worm or auger (essentially a corkscrew on a stick) to fish out any debris from the previous firing that could be harboring embers. It may be seen to pull out aluminum foil, which is historically inaccurate, but much safer as it doesn't smolder compared to the cloth or linen that would have been historically used in the “casing” of the charge. In the next step, the gunner will swab the piece with the wet swab (basically a wet sponge on the end of a stick) to cool the barrel, further dowse sparks, as well as create a vacuum, so an audible thump may be heard, signaling that it is safe to load the charge. At this point the gunner will then ram the charge down (4 ounces of black powder, fairly small compared to a 20 ounce combat charge, so as to not scare horses). The crew will wheel the piece into battery, then prime the piece by poking a hole in the charge with a brass spike called a gimlet. An ignition device called a friction primer will then be inserted into the touch hole. A friction primer is a small brass tube filled with fine gunpowder and a friction sensitive chemical known as mercury fulminate at the top with a pin. A firing trigger known as the lanyard is attached to the friction primer so that when the pin is pulled, it will send a jet of flame down the touch hole, igniting the main charge. The cannon demonstration will commence with the commands, “Ready, Fire!”

